

Dear Arlington School Committee,

My name is Lianna Bessette, and I'm in my seventh year as an English teacher at Arlington High School. Although this fall has been challenging, I have seen a lot of success, much more than I expected. I rarely have students absent from class, and students have shared with me how much they appreciate having fewer classes to keep track of in the semester model. I can easily gauge understanding during class by using tech tools like Pear Deck, and I can easily meet with students individually during class as well. We can meet privately, using individual breakout rooms, and we can talk through their writing, grades, homework assignments, and even any personal struggles they want to share. I also co-teach a class, so my co-teacher is able to provide extra support for our in-person students on IEPs while I connect with everyone remotely. Daily classes are going quite well, and students are learning.

I am concerned about my students who miss connecting in person with their peers. I have seen students start to turn their cameras off, even as I urge them to stay engaged. We're all going through our own difficulties, but students are still completing their assignments. They're still sharing aloud, sometimes voluntarily and sometimes only when I ask them to do so. They still collaborate with their peers in breakout rooms during almost every class. For these reasons, I am excited about the departmental shift model. Although fully remote school has worked much better than I expected, I also very much miss seeing my students and colleagues in real life. The energy is low for many of us right now, so I'd like some sort of change to give me something to look forward to. I welcome the opportunity to see my fellow English teachers in person every couple weeks, and I'm excited about seeing my students more regularly. I've planned two reverse field trips, but the process of filling out forms, communicating with administrators, and getting parent permission takes time that I'd rather spend planning my classes and supporting students. With regularly planned in-person meetings, I could make the most of those days and plan engaging experiences for my classes more often. I've used the reverse field trips to work on movement activities, like acting out a play, that are harder to do on Zoom, and I'm eager to host these sorts of activities regularly.

Any other model makes me deeply anxious. Every other proposed model takes away a significant amount of synchronous time, and I know many students would fall behind. I think the current model has worked so well academically (at least for my students) because I have so much time with them for direct instruction, check-ins, and direct support. Even if we were somehow able to have a 2-cohort model (which I've been told repeatedly that we don't have the space to do), I would either have to significantly cut my curriculum or be comfortable with many students having poor grades. So many students struggle with asynchronous work, especially from their homes, so I know my most vulnerable students would fall behind. I urge the committee to avoid choosing any model that significantly reduces synchronous time, since I believe that factor has contributed most to student success this fall.

I also urge the committee to avoid choosing a model that would alter the current course offerings. I, for instance, teach a senior Poetry class, and I teach one of only two sections of the class. The first section is occurring now, in the fall. I will teach the only section of Poetry in the spring, and I know several students currently signed up for my class who have been planning to

take Poetry since we talked about courses during their sophomore year. If we had to create a remote academy, I suspect that Poetry wouldn't be offered remotely, since I would likely be teaching in-person. There are many classes like this that students have been looking forward to for years. I would hate to see students lose out on academic opportunities.

Not knowing next semester's model makes me very anxious. I have reworked my sophomore English curriculum to fit into this strange new schedule, and I'm happy with the results. I have two more sections of sophomore English next semester, and I would love to be able to reuse most of my plans, since they've been working. Similarly, students are now used to this semester's schedule, and most are making it work. Any drastic changes will require both students and teachers to totally rearrange their routines and plans during a time when we need some sense of normalcy. I welcome the opportunity to add more in-person teaching to our current model, but I worry about making any major changes. As a teacher, especially, I know that the level of work I'm putting into planning isn't sustainable, and the other models would require some major shifts in the ways that we think about planning our classes. (The 4-cohort model, for instance, would require us to keep track of four different sections of each class, which sounds impossible to me.)

We teachers care deeply about this decision. My husband and I (both AHS teachers) were watching Monday night's listening session, and we could tell how emotional families feel about their children's education. Speaking out at a public meeting makes me uncomfortable because I don't want families to feel differently about me based on my opinions, just as I didn't share my opinions with my students when I encouraged them to fill out the schedule survey. Even if we aren't sharing publicly, we care, and we do have opinions on what is best for our students. We've shared our thoughts in surveys and meetings, and I am continuing to share with this letter.

I am happy to discuss any of these issues further, and I hope you will consider my perspective as an AHS teacher. I truly appreciate the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Sincerely,
Lianna Bessette
Arlington High School English Teacher